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SUBJECT: UNEMPLOYED MAROONS PROTESTING LACK OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES BARRICADE MAIN HIGHWAY, COMMANDEER BUSFUL OF WORKERS HEADING TO CANADIAN GOLD MINING COMPANY CAMBIOR

SUMMARY

1. After two days of unrest, protesters who had been disrupting operations of the Canadian gold mining company Cambior, in Suriname's Brokopondo district, decided to seek a peaceful resolution to address their key demand. Displeased with Cambior's alleged employment practices, protesters called on the government to revoke part of Cambior's concession and to grant them land for small-scale gold mining. The move to a peaceful resolution followed the commandeering of a busload of Cambior workers who were later released unharmed and the barricading of a major highway leading to Cambior's gold mine, which resulted in the police and the military being deployed to the area. Former military strongman Desi Bouterse's National Democratic Party quickly denied that it played a role in the disturbances amidst accusations that the disturbances were politically motivated in the run up to the May 2005 elections. End Summary.

TEMPORARY END TO UNREST

2. According to local media reports, on July 2, young unemployed protesters from the Maroon village of Nieuw Koffiekamp agreed to cease disrupting operations of the Canadian gold mining company Cambior, in Brokopondo district, 85 kilometers south of Suriname's capital Paramaribo. (Note: Maroons are descendants of slaves that escaped harsh slave masters to Suriname's remote interior. End Note.) The protesters had targeted Cambior because it allegedly hired most of its workers from the capital, Paramaribo, rather than surrounding villages. They decided to give the government time to review their proposal to revoke part of the concession granted to Cambior and to provide them with land for small-scale gold mining. They made no mention of what time frame was accorded to the government or what steps they would take if the government did not meet this demand.

PROTESTERS COMMANDEER BUSFUL OF WORKERS, BARRICADE HIGHWAY

3. The protesters' decision to seek a peaceful resolution of their claim followed two days of unrest. On June 28, protesters commandeered and then released a busful of Cambior workers near Nieuw Koffiekamp after they were unsuccessful in obtaining support from two nearby villages, Klaaskreek and Marchalkreek. They demanded that the government permit them to engage in small-scale gold mining, that it address continuing power outages, and that it pave Afobaka highway. They threatened to start a new interior war if the government failed to address their demands. (Note: Maroon soldier Ronny Brunswijk led a guerilla insurgency against the Desi Bouterse-led military regime in 1987 which ended in 1992, with acceptance of the Kourou Peace Accords. End Note.)

4. In response to the disturbance, the government deployed police in the area to restore order and refused requests to negotiate with the protesters until they ceased disrupting the peace. Minister of Regional Development Romeo Van Russell stated publicly that the government would do its utmost to maintain contact with the protesters but vowed that it would resort to more serious measures if the protesters continued to disrupt Cambior's mining operations.

5. The bus incident followed a June 27 altercation in which the police and the military had to use tear gas on protesters who had barricaded the Afobaka highway. Prior to that incident, Brokopondo District Commissioner Hugo Pinas and village captain Ludwig Wijnerman initiated talks with the protesters in an attempt to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict. However, during talks between representatives of the protesters, the District Commissioner, and Cambior's management, other protesters

started to throw stones at two fuel trucks on their way to Cambior's premises. When the protesters attempted to set a barricade made of old tires ablaze, the government had to deploy military and police reinforcements to clear the road.

REACTIONS TO THE DISTURBANCES

16. Village leaders and representatives of the protesters engaged in talks have been quick to condemn the radical posture of a minority group. The village leaders, in particular, expressed fears that Cambior would abandon agricultural and animal husbandry projects worth 30,000 Surinamese dollars (about \$12,000). Bert Eersteling, one of the leaders of the Nieuw Koffiekamp Collective, a group that supports Cambior's activities, told the Embassy he believes that the radicals, who number around a dozen individuals, are being manipulated by people from Paramaribo with interests in the gold mining sector. He added that former military strongman Desi Bouterse's National Democratic Party will try to capitalize politically on the problems at Nieuw Koffiekamp, as campaigning for the May 2005 elections has already begun.

17. Amidst swirling rumors of NDP's involvement, the party quickly denied that it had instigated the disturbances. NDP National Assembly member Yvonne Pinas publicly accused the government of blaming the opposition for its mistakes.

COMMENT

18. The Afobaka disturbances highlight longstanding grievances held by residents in Suriname's interior over successive governments' refusal to recognize longstanding land claims. Cambior, for its part, has tried to make peace with villagers through employment opportunities, funding for local projects, and community committee input. This has done little to appease the Nieuw Koffiekampers. Still, it is highly unlikely that the government would revoke a portion of Cambior's concession and distribute the land to the protesters, a move that would surely undermine the confidence of any future investors in Suriname. Until the government, Cambior, and villagers negotiate an agreement which resolves the issue of surface rights, the Gross Rosebel mine will remain a bone of contention for Nieuw Koffiekampers. Opposition parties like the NDP can be expected to exploit it in the run up to the 2005 elections. End Comment.

BARNES

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